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Addressing the challenges and realizing the potential benefits of migration to better nutrition in the Europe and Central Asia region

About this discussion

This document summarizes the online consultation *Addressing the challenges and realizing the potential benefits of migration to better nutrition in the Europe and Central Asia region*, which was held on the FAO Forum on Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia (FSN Forum in ECA) from 25 October to 17 December 2018.

The seven weeks of consultation saw the participation of experts from 11 countries: Belarus, Hungary, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Italy, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Norway, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

The consultation was initiated by the FAO project *“Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia”*, funded by the Russian Federation and led by the FAO Agricultural Development Economics Division. The facilitators were as follows:

- ▶ **Nurullo Mahmadullozoda** – Deputy Minister, Ministry for Labour, Migration and Employment of Population of the Republic of Tajikistan
- ▶ **Iulia Costin** – State Secretary, Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure of the Republic of Moldova; Advisor, Organization for the Development of Small and Medium Enterprises, Moldova
- ▶ **Irina Ivakhnyuk** – Professor, Member of the Global Migration Policy Associates (GMPA), Russian Federation
- ▶ **Mauricio Rosales** – Senior Project Coordinator, Capacity Development Officer, Agricultural Development Economics Division, FAO, Italy

Introduction

Despite considerable progress in reducing severe forms of poverty and the incidence of malnutrition across all the countries of Europe and Central Asia, poverty remains endemic in rural areas of the region. Rural economies are hampered by limited opportunities for non-farm employment and income diversification coupled with stagnant entrepreneurial activity, which have led to large-scale rural out-migration.

Of the various migration flows that exist in the Europe and Central Asia region, one of the most important is labour migration from the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia to the Russian Federation; indeed, most contributions to this online consultation focused on this particular migration flow. Generally, migrants from the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia stay in Russia for a short time or a season to earn income (Guljahan Kurbanova, Irina Ivakhnyuk, Akyl, Alexandra Potapova), often leaving their families behind (Guljahan Kurbanova). These migrants typically engage in circular migration, which allows them to earn the money they need for specific stages of their family life cycle, such as building a house and getting married (Akyl). Every year, about three million migrants

from Central Asia alone find employment in the Russian Federation (Irina Ivakhnyuk), where certain sectors have high demand for labour and wages are better than in migrants' countries of origin (Guljahan Kurbanova, Alexandra Potapova). Furthermore, migration between the countries is facilitated by their historical and cultural ties (Olga Pashkevich).

During this online consultation, participants identified some of the consequences of these migration flows for migrants' countries of origin and, to a lesser extent, for countries of destination. They focused on the topics of agriculture improvement and food security and nutrition, but also discussed development more generally. Specific attention was paid to the potential impact of remittances on countries of origin. In a number of comments, suggestions were shared on how governments could support and facilitate the investment of remittances in the local rural economy and in particular in agriculture development, while other contributors pointed to challenges that exist in this regard. In addition, views were shared on how the issue of migration should be approached by policy-makers, reflecting both the belief that migration boosts development as well as the opinion that it poses a threat to it.

Migration's consequences for countries of origin and destination

Consultation participants highlighted that migration between the South Caucasus and Central Asia region and the Russian Federation is mutually beneficial, as it addresses the labour surplus in the former and the labour shortage in the latter (Alexandra Potapova, Irina Ivakhnyuk). Importantly, in countries of origin migration helps to resolve social tensions by reducing unemployment (Alexandra Potapova, Matraim Jusupov), and engaging in employment abroad gives people the opportunity to build new technical and language skills (Akyl, Irina Ivakhnyuk).

An immediate result of international migration is the inflow of remittances to migrants' countries of origin. Remittances are crucial for the national economies of these countries (Matraim Jusupov, Akbar Subkhonov, Guljahan Kurbanova, Alexandra Potapova): for instance, in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, remittances equal more than 30 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), while for Moldova, the remittance-to-GDP ratio reaches 20 percent (Matraim Jusupov). Remittances are also essential at the household level, as they provide additional income and give families the opportunity to improve their financial situation and their food and housing conditions (Irina Ivakhnyuk). Migrants

can even be seen as providers of social security (Matraim Jusupov). Moreover, consultation participants noted that remittances have been helping to reduce poverty (Irina Ivakhnyuk, Matraim Jusupov) and increase school attendance among children, contributing to the development of human capital in countries of origin (Irina Ivakhnyuk). However, in this specific regard one should also consider that these countries may be negatively affected by the "brain drain" that accompanies out-migration (Guljahan Kurbanova).



Consequences for food security and nutrition

One of the consultation contributions explained three ways that migration has an impact on the food security and nutrition of migrant-sending households:

1. through the receipt of remittances, which can influence consumption and investment patterns;
2. through the sharing of information, knowledge and skills gained by the migrant abroad, which can influence household behaviour; and
3. through the reduction in the number of household members, which results in lower consumption needs but also in a loss of labour.

One participant pointed out that remittance-receiving households in countries of origin are generally more food-secure than non-migrant households, or than migrant households who do not receive remittances ([Guljahan](#)

[Kurbanova](#)). A positive effect was also recognized by another participant, who stated that thanks to remittances, people in countries of origin "eat better" ([Irina Ivakhnyuk](#)). However, at the same time another contributor pointed out that migration and remittances would lead to consumption of unhealthy fast food ([Dono Abdurazakova](#)). In addition, an example was also shared from outside the region: that of Nigeria, where out-migration has generally worsened food insecurity ([Adigun Temitayo](#)).

One participant pointed out that in their country of destination, migrants are among the most vulnerable members in society, and often have limited access to good nutrition. The fact that they are likely to work under poor conditions makes them even more vulnerable to malnutrition. In fact, in destination countries, immigrant households are generally less food-secure than households without immigrants ([Guljahan Kurbanova](#)).

Consequences for agriculture

Participants stated that migration can have the following consequences for agriculture development in migrant-sending countries, which in turn can threaten national food security:

1. a decline (sometimes immediate) in the number of agricultural producers in rural areas ([Lal Manavado](#)), which makes the sector more vulnerable and may hamper the development of agricultural regions ([Guljahan Kurbanova](#)); and
2. a general loss of farming and local irrigation structures due to disuse ([Lal Manavado](#)). A positive impact was mentioned as well: when abroad, migrants gain experience in working with different techniques, tools and varieties, which can be used for the development of the agricultural sector of their home countries once the migrants return ([Alexandra Potapova](#)).

In some destination countries, migrants play an important role in agricultural production and development. They compensate for labour shortages and constitute a significant proportion of the total number of people employed in the sector in

countries such as Spain (23 percent), Canada (18 percent), Italy (16 percent), and the United States of America (15 percent). Some countries implement special programmes to attract seasonal agricultural workers from abroad. In these cases, migrants' employers have to fulfil a number of obligations, such as ensuring that wages and working conditions meet certain minimum requirements ([Alexandra Potapova](#)).



Investing remittances for agricultural development and improved food security

Currently, there is not much investment of remittances in the agricultural sector in migrants' countries of origin. However, investing these remittances – especially in organic farming ([Rob Blakemore](#)) – has the potential not only to support agricultural and broader rural development, but also to provide families of migrants with a safety net ([Matraim Jusupov](#)).

Remittances could be invested in small and medium-sized business in sectors such as retail, services and infrastructure. In the South Caucasus and Central Asia region, however, it would be particularly useful to invest them in agriculture, a sector that can become a driver of economic growth in the region. For this to be realized, agriculture must be given special

Matching grants for migrant families in Tajikistan

In the framework of the FAO project Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia, FAO and the Government of Tajikistan are implementing the pilot "Promoting Inclusive Growth through Matching Grants", which aims to harness the development potential of migration by mobilizing remittances for agricultural development and agribusiness activities.

The pilot assists beneficiaries – migrants and their families – in formulating business plans for small- and medium-scale enterprises in agricultural production and agribusiness. Beneficiaries receive financial support to realize their business ideas: for every dollar invested from remittances, an additional dollar is provided from project funds. The pilot's capacity development programmes help migrant families build skills in business development (Nurullo Mahmudulloev).

attention in state policy (Irina Ivakhnyuk). Governments should, *inter alia*, help facilitate the investment of remittances in agriculture by creating a favourable investment climate (Irina Ivakhnyuk, Matraim Jusupov, Alexandra Potapova), which entails providing additional financial resources, access to insurance, education and professional training, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and creating tax benefits (Alexandra Potapova, Irina Ivakhnyuk, Guljahan Kurbanova). In this context, states should also consider that the concept of "homeland" is very important for the people from the region, and that many migrants dream of returning to a "prosperous homeland", which they can help to create. While "love for the motherland" is not an economic aspect, it can become an important factor in the economic development of a country if the state realizes the positive potential of international labour migration and sends the appropriate message to society (Irina Ivakhnyuk, Matraim Jusupov).

In general, participants agreed that governments should support productive investment of remittances. Some of them cited examples of policies and programmes that have successfully attracted financial resources from migrants for productive investments, including those implemented

in China, Turkey, and Mexico (Irina Ivakhnyuk), which could be studied and applied (Matraim Jusupov). However, some participants pointed to issues that can arise in the implementation of these programmes. First, doubts were expressed concerning "best practices" in this field: namely, that these practices are unique to the countries in which they were implemented, and their sustainability has not been proven. Furthermore, referring specifically to the agricultural sector, it was stressed that wide applicability of these practices would be difficult due to the need for context-specific approaches (Lal Manavado). Second, also considering the broader context in which such initiatives are to be implemented, a participant highlighted that the region's agricultural value chains are still confronted by many challenges, and thus are not yet ready for these kinds of interventions (Matraim Jusupov). Third, according to a study on Tajikistan, migrants are sceptical not only of investment in agricultural production, but also of the procedures for participation in these kinds of programmes. These migrants argue that the selection of beneficiaries is often unfair, and that family ties play an important role in the selection process (Eldar Kelemetov).

Managing migration for the promotion of sustainable development

The region's migrant-sending countries are increasingly regulating migration flows and assessing the consequences of migration and remittances for their development (Irina Ivakhnyuk). In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, a major argument in favour of joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was the need to improve the legal status of the more than 600 000 of its citizens living in the Russian Federation. After the country's accession to the EEU, employment procedures for Kyrgyz migrants were simplified and the social conditions of Kyrgyz labour migrants were improved (Matraim Jusupov).

Elsewhere, in Tajikistan the government has increasingly paid attention to migration management. The National Development Strategy of Tajikistan until 2030 outlines the following main priorities in the field of migration:

1. diversifying the pool of destination countries of Tajik labour migrants;
2. reintegrating returnees; and
3. improving the skill level of migrant workers.

Empowering women in migrant households

Women play a key role in food security. This becomes particularly clear when looking at the "feminization of agriculture" in countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where out-migration of rural men has been a leading factor. Besides working on the land, women who are left behind in countries of origin often take care of children and the elderly, and hence fulfil multiple roles. Not all women who have a family member abroad receive remittances. Moreover, women who remain are often among the poorest in their communities.

While recognizing this problem, governmental as well as non-governmental organizations usually focus on small-scale support for rural women. Although one should not give up this approach, it should be amended to meet women's strategic needs: e.g. they should be provided with access to tertiary education. Furthermore, governments and organizations should support the investment of remittances in the education of daughters of migrants, as this is a long-term investment in food security (Dono Abdurazakova).

Furthermore, the Road Map on Social and Economic Reintegration of Returned Labour Migrants to the Republic of Tajikistan for 2018–2021 has been developed, and guidelines for the provision of services by employment services to returning migrants have been approved by the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment (Nurullo Mahmaddullozoda).

Participants formulated recommendations for policy-makers on various aspects related to migration, with some taking migration's positive impact on countries of origin as a point of departure. For instance, one participant argued that the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia region should support the poor who want to migrate to the Russian Federation, as migration allows them to earn an income. This assistance should, *inter alia*, consist of free tuition to learn the Russian language and provision of technical training in sectors such as construction. In countries of destination, free advising should be provided for migrants, in their native language, to help them with their questions and problems (AkyI). Furthermore, information sharing on the provision of social services for migrants should be improved; civil society should be more actively supported in order to achieve this (Guljahan Kurbanova).

Other participants perceived migration mainly as a threat to development, which requires different policy responses. Making specific reference to the adverse impact migration would have on food security, one participant stressed that rural people should be encouraged to "remain home" and to engage in agriculture, and that migrants should be given incentives to return and engage in agricultural activities in their country of origin (Lal Manavado). However, it was also pointed out that migrants will only return to their villages and fields when farming has become a profitable business.

In fact, resolutions of the problems related to the stagnation in agricultural development will directly depend on the level of economic development of the country concerned; until the country becomes rich and economically developed, out-migration will continue (Matraim Jusupov). In any case, favourable investment conditions should be created for returnees (Matraim Jusupov, Guljahan Kurbanova) and alternative sources of income should be promoted in rural areas (Natalia Kireenko).



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